

TALE OF THE TOWER

BY OWEN HYAMS

My pal Frank and I turned 17 and enlisted in the Air Force on the “buddy plan” Halloween night 1960. Frank went to Germany to ride a hospital train and my journey started at Keesler Air Traffic Control school. Soon I was off to the 1st Mobile Communications Group in the Philippines.

One night while playing cards in the day room, I got orders to draw weapons and report to the flightline where I soon found myself with a machine gun and a seat on the Ambassador’s flight to Saigon.

The mobile unit we were supposed to man in the Delta got sunk, so I became a replacement for a mobile tower unit at Quang Ngai in the northern coastal region. There wasn’t much there in 1963.

The tower was a tiny affair, barely big enough for my 6-foot frame. The radios were hardly adequate, but we did have a direction finder, which along with a good set of ears came in handy during the rainy season. After a bout with malaria, the 1st MOB put me back in Vietnam at Bien Hoa, which in 1964 was really starting to hop.

As more jets entered the war, the work load increased to a hectic pace. The Vietnamese had a hard time mixing the jets with the different types of prop-driven aircraft, not to mention helicopters, and of course there were a pair of U-2’s that landed all frosted up. I guess I got pretty good at my job

because when my enlistment was almost up they told me I wasn’t going anywhere. On Halloween of ’64 my buddy Frank got discharged, and I drew the midnight shift at Bien Hoa tower.

We were just settling in when the first shells started landing on us. I guess they were trying to knock our communications out, and they did a pretty good job. One shell blew me halfway down to the next level where the radio and high voltage Nav-Aids were knocked out of their cages and sparks were flying all over. The rescue unit took a direct hit in their tent and killed them all ... except one who managed to get in the tower with his machine gun. There were stacks of bombs that started exploding as they were hit or set afire from the jet fuel. We were cut by the flying glass of the windows, but we were alive and trying to function. I couldn’t get anyone on the radios until I overheard an Air France talking to Saigon. The French pilot got the message through. Soon I heard the sweetest radio message of my career from call sign Red Dragon who told us to hang in there ... “they were on the way with the whole squadron of armed Hueys.”

Soon the call

came in they could see our flares and then said, “Where do you want it?” It took a minute to realize they were asking where to fire.

I don’t know how much good I did, but it was sure better than getting pounded doing nothing. Soon some fighters arrived and a few of our A-1’s got off. The Hueys came down and we loaded our dead.

I stayed in Vietnam another 4 1/2 months. They were picking glass out of me for weeks, and sometimes I think there’s still some in there. I didn’t know it at the time but I was all done being an air traffic controller because the doctors determined I lost my depth perception.

The Air Force retrained me as a loadmaster, and I went back to Vietnam in ’67-68 with the 310th Air Commandos and flew 1,144 sorties in a twin engine C-123. It was strange flying into Quang Ngai and Bien Hoa, seeing the controllers in the tower and thinking: “That used to be me.”

I miss being an air traffic controller.

I was good at it and enjoyed doing it, but I realize every day how lucky I am to have survived and had the chance to have a life and a family, especially on Halloween. *(Editor’s note: He earned a Bronze Star for his actions that night.)*

Time
Machine

Airman 1st Class Owen Hyams



Bien Hoa Tower Crew



Quang Ngai Tower
“LONELY ACRES”

1964